



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Old habits die hard in post-Civil War Alexandria

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Image: 404 S. Royal. Photo, Chris Teale, Alexandria Times.

For many whites in Alexandria, post-Civil War economic problems and restrictions imposed by Reconstruction often made the large number of black residents an easy target.

At a political rally in front of the Mansion House Hotel in 1866, W.W. Walker from Westmoreland County, Va. “declared himself ready to accept the new condition of affairs, in relation to the colored people, and favored making them good and useful citizens . . . but it was hard that white people should be allowed to suffer . . . while the negro is fostered and educated by the government.”



Some whites blamed outsiders for stirring up discontent among black residents, frequently citing the same northern “Radicals” who were agitating them politically. Others made a distinction between responsible, hard-working black residents who were native to the area and “the vast horde of worthless ‘lazy contrabands’ ... who have swarmed into the District to enjoy the hospitalities of the government.” One article specifically referred to people living in Alexandria County, asserted that they “live mostly by plundering” and “don’t seem to know how to get a good living any other way.”

This strained situation was made even more acute following the August 1867 announcement that the Freedmen’s Bureau would no longer be providing food and fuel assistance to poor Southerners, instead turning that responsibility over to local governments. That September, the commission on indigent freedmen reminded city council that Alexandria’s own relief responsibilities extended only to long-term local residents; other refugees and contrabands would need to return to their former home localities to seek assistance.

Despite these challenges, black Alexandrians were melding into the larger society, and participating more fully in the life of the town. There was interest in forming a “Colored Hook & Ladder Co.” following a meeting at Bethel Church, and two all-black baseball teams played a game in 1867 “on open ground near the Catholic cemetery.” In July 1869, black voters saw carpenter, builder and real estate entrepreneur George Seaton, who lived at the 404 S. Royal St. home seen above and whose parents had once been enslaved at Mount Vernon, elected to the Virginia House of Delegates.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Though passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution by 1870 seemed to guarantee the abolition of slavery, full citizenship status, equal protection under the law and voting rights for all men, a very long road lay ahead. Many legal rights and societal norms involving the ways in which blacks and whites lived their lives together needed to be changed, discussed, fought over and resolved over the course of the next century, as the era of "Jim Crow" arrived in the South.

In Alexandria, an idealized, romantic vision of "The old South" was already forming during Reconstruction, as editorials occasionally reminisced about "the old days" or "days gone by." Christmas traditions involving treats for grateful servants sprung up, and there were lively corn huskings marked by "the songs of the colored people, on the farms adjacent to town." Old habits and symbols persisted, as when a circus arrived in town with the "band . . . dressed in Confederate gray" while "Confederate flags adorned the wagons in the procession."

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.